

Anti-Fascist Action

– an Anarchist perspective



By an ex-Liverpool AFA member

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Kate Sharpley Library

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What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal shares of the good things in life would work better than this one. Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new 'revolutionary' bosses are no improvement: 'ends' and 'means' (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

Introductory Note

"Anti-Fascist Action – an Anarchist Perspective" first appeared – in edited/cut form – in late 2005^[A]. This is the full, valid, version, as originally intended, and with the original graphics. The article is exactly what it says it is – an anarchist perspective on Anti-Fascist Action, by an ex-member of Liverpool AFA. As such it's part history and part political analysis. It starts with why the article is being written, and finishes with a check on how things stood in early 2005.

As Note 3 in the article makes clear this article is the reviewed, revised, final version.

However, as there have been several attempts at editing, or partially re-writing this article, some further points need making – to make clearer what this article is, and what it isn't:

- This article is a summary of AFA's politics, history, and activities – from the early days to the end, from a Liverpool perspective. Much of the material isn't currently found anywhere else^[B].
- This article does *not* claim to be a 'full' history of AFA – either geographically, or in terms of what AFA did. This should be obvious. AFA activity ranged from the very public to the not public. A 'full' genuine history of AFA is very unlikely in the near future.
- This is an insider's view of AFA. It is partisan, and some of what is said is controversial in some quarters.
- There has, however, been a very strong attempt to be accurate in the article. It's made very clear which bits of the article are based on direct knowledge, which bits are believed to be true, and which bits are based on third parties. The issue of credibility of sources – in terms of proven militancy and political independence – is taken very seriously. The Notes are as important as the main text.
- This article can be read at several levels. The article is written to be understandable for people new to politics. The peer review group, however – ie people who can actually have a valid opinion about

what is said, based on 'having been there' – is, and can only be, ex-AFA militants. The Notes are aimed at both groups.

- This article is highly condensed. Words mean what they mean and for very specific reasons.

An ex-Liverpool AFA member,
November 2006

References:

A. *Black Flag* issue no 225.

B. This goes for public events as well. For instance, the Newcastle festival in 1993 was organised by TWAFa – then part of AFA; all the security was provided by AFA activists from as far as the south of England; there was an AFA banner on stage; this was one of several AFA festivals. None of this AFA connection, however, can be found on the TWAFa web site.

[www.twafa.org.uk].

Anti-Fascist Action – An Anarchist Perspective

Militant physical force anti-fascism has a long tradition in Britain – going back to the 1930's, and the 'Battle of Cable Street' in London's East End. From the mid-1980's to the turn of the century, militant anti-fascism found its most authentic expression through the organisation Anti-Fascist Action. AFA was never an 'anarchist' organisation. However, the agreement of anarchists with AFA's twin aims of 'ideological and physical opposition to fascism', and the anarchist emphasis on direct action as compared to electoralism, meant that, within AFA, much of the cutting edge on the streets was provided by anarchist activists.

The following is a brief summary and analysis of those years, and the aftermath.



With the 2004 publication of a book – “No Retreat” – by two former members of Manchester Anti-Fascist Action^[1], and the launch of a new physical force anti-fascist organisation – AntiFa^[2] – now [2005] seems as good a time as any to go over some old ground as to what Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) was, what it did, and why it eventually fell apart, from an anarchist perspective. This isn’t a ‘kiss and tell’, so names will be avoided, and specifics kept out where possible. It is also the perspective of an ex-AFA member active in Liverpool and the Northern Network, so it will mostly take a Northern angle^[3].

Confronting fascism in Liverpool

As has been written before, AFA was originally set up in 1985 as a broad front anti-fascist organisation. The main fascist organisation at this time was the British National Party (BNP). Various contenders for the title of the ‘real’ National Front also existed, following the demise of the original NF after Thatcher took power in 1979. Taking Liverpool as an example, the few attempts by the BNP or NF to hold public marches or meetings in the city centre during the 1980’s had been smashed into the ground by a large turn out from locals – notably from the Liverpool black community^[4]. The last attempt by fascists (NF) to march through Liverpool city centre was in 1986 – also an early AFA national mobilisation. This failure of big events, however, didn’t stop the BNP selling papers openly in the town centre on a regular basis, unopposed. This also didn’t stop them starting a campaign of violence against Left wing targets – in particular against the bookshop ‘News From Nowhere’, run by a feminist collective. After a few almost-successful attempts to burn the bookshop down, the windows being smashed in on Saturday daytime attacks – probably after a paper sale – and fascists generally strutting into the bookshop to intimidate staff and customers as and when they pleased, it was obvious something had to be done. Other fascist attacks at the time included smashing the windows of the Wirral Trades Council (over the water from Liverpool). BNP local activity like this was typical in any area in Britain where they were left unchallenged.

AFA was launched in Liverpool in 1986. At that time, Militant was still the strongest working class group on the Left (though in the process of being kicked out of the Labour Party). Neither they nor the Socialist Workers Party were interested in being organisationally part of AFA. The SWP, in fact, sometimes sold papers in Liverpool city centre at the same time as the BNP – though, to be fair, if a fascist march was likely both the SWP and Militant

would have a turn out. From an early stage the main organisers of Liverpool AFA were associated with the local anarchist scene. This became more explicit with the re-launch of Liverpool Anarchist Group in 1987.

Liverpool AFA was mostly anarchist – but it was never an anarchist front or a recruiting tool, except by way of natural influence. Anyone who agreed with the ‘physical and ideological opposition to fascism’ could be involved, and many did. Links were made with Trade Unions to raise money for specific events. Links were also made with Jewish and other anti-racist groups, and meetings were held to attract wider participation. In later years this non-sectarianism also meant a working relationship with some of the new Anti-Nazi League activists. Anti-fascists at the two universities also set up AFA groups at this time – a process repeated several times as students came and went.

Within a year or so, the Liverpool BNP went from boasting about how the ‘reds’ were always beaten in Liverpool when they tried to force the BNP off the streets (according to confiscated copies of the *British Nationalist*), to the effective collapse of the group. Years later, the BNP admitted in the *Liverpool Echo* that “they were driven underground by left wing extremists in the mid-80s” [Oct 1993]. This kind of effective shut-down of BNP groups – by any means necessary – was also typical of AFA in this period.

National AFA and the North

Nationally, meanwhile, the original AFA had collapsed due to incompatible political differences. Local and Regional groups (like the Northern Network) however continued, and national call-outs still occurred using existing contacts. AFA was re-launched in London in 1989, and in 1992 a national meeting was held in London to sort out a new national structure. The re-launch of AFA was as a militant ‘united front’ – ie an alliance of different political tendencies – orientated towards the working class, to reclaim working class areas then claimed by fascists as their own. The class perspective was agreed because, first, fascists don’t just play the race card – they address genuine fears of the white working class (unemployment, bad housing etc) and their success is often based on disillusionment with so-called ‘socialist’ councils. This propaganda needed a class-based answer. Second, it wasn’t enough to ‘defend democracy’ – if AFA didn’t say the system needed to be smashed, that would leave fascism as the ‘radical’ alternative. Third, the working class is the object of fascist attack once in power – only the working class can oppose it. AFA, it was agreed, wasn’t interested in ‘allies’ that were

part of the problem such as corrupt councillors. Links, it was agreed, would continue to be made with black and asian communities under attack, but AFA propaganda should be mainly aimed at the communities where fascists themselves aimed to recruit^[5].

Organisationally, it was agreed that AFA would be a decentralised federation based on a regional structure – building from the existing regions of London AFA and the Northern Network. The only national structure was to be a national coordinating committee of 2 delegates per region, to meet as and when needed, with no powers to make policy (or certainly to impose policy – some minor national decisions did have to be made over these years, but these were non-controversial).

London AFA at that time was mostly run by the marxist Red Action – in alliance with elements of the anarcho-syndicalist Direct Action Movement (DAM)^[6] ^[7], and the trotskyst Workers Power. There were also non-aligned independents – anarchists and other socialists – involved.

The Northern Network (originally the Northern Anti-Fascist Network) was a looser federation of Northern AFA groups – Bolton, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, South Yorks, Tyne and Wear, Preston, and others. Tyne and Wear were actually a Council-funded body set up before AFA. Of the rest, Manchester were run mainly by Red Action (the strongest Red Action branch outside of London as far as I can tell); a few groups – like York – would probably be best described as “non-aligned” independents. The rest were mainly organised by anarchists – sometimes in the DAM, sometimes not. Lots of anarchist activists at the time weren’t in any national organisation – or were involved mainly in other areas. This reflected the way the anarchist movement had grown since the early 1980’s – some became anarchists through the Left or Trade Unions, others through anti-militarism, others through animal rights. In the North things tended not to be as sectarian as in London. Apart from the regional groups of the DAM and Class War, there was also the general Northern Anarchist Network. There were often overlaps between different anarchist and activist scenes – people would join a call-out, but didn’t necessarily prioritise anti-fascism. Even the DAM didn’t officially prioritise anti-fascism – many or most of the DAM were trade union activists or shop stewards – though some groups definitely prioritised the anti-fascist fight more than others. In Liverpool, again, anti-fascism was only one area – in 1988-1990, anarchists were far more active against the Poll Tax, and in 1995-1997 more active in support of 500 locked-out Liverpool Dockers. For Liverpool anarchists, anti-fascism was never seen as an end in itself – only as part of the wider struggle.

It’s often a good indicator as to whether a movement is alive or in trouble – is there a wider periphery, or is it just the activists? AFA at its height was definitely far more than the activist core, and far more than just street fighters. AFA activism involved public speaking, magazine and pamphlet production, organising fund-raisers (gigs, carnivals), etc. A lot of people put time and effort into AFA-related activities who agreed with the aims, but weren’t particularly involved organisationally – or go to meetings. It should also be noted that at this time there was a working – and productive – relationship between the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* and AFA, partly because AFA was the only game in town. This included, in Liverpool, a *Searchlight* member from Manchester speaking at a Liverpool AFA re-launch meeting in 1992.



AFA in action

At a Regional and National level, AFA actions were mainly based around countering known – or intelligence-indicated – fascist mobilisations. Remembrance Sunday in London was the first national focus point in 1986 – the National Front having made a point of marching to the Cenotaph on the day, then attacking Left wing targets – notably the Anti-Apartheid picket outside the South African Embassy. These militant AFA mobilisations had the desired effect – the fascists were stopped. In the North, meanwhile, the Northern Network mobilised against the BNP’s Remembrance Sunday meetings at Clifford’s Tower, York. The BNP chose Clifford’s Tower as it was the site where many of York’s Jewish community were burned to death in the middle ages. Some of these early AFA mobilisations to York were

relatively open, and quite large. In 1988, for instance, Liverpool AFA took a full coach and minibus – over 80 people – to the event, though on that occasion we were stopped on the outskirts of York and escorted all the way back to Liverpool by the police (the same happened to a coach from Newcastle). Echoes of police tactics in the Miner's Strike of 1984-85... Later mobilisations tended to use just mini-buses. Again, after a few years, AFA tactics were successful.

Remembrance Sunday was only one day – many other AFA mobilisations occurred, in many parts of the country, over these years. This was especially so as new AFA groups were formed and new AFA Regions were organised (established Regions providing backup to new areas, such as the Midlands, when requested)^[8]. Tactics evolved and were constantly under review. A typical 'event' in the North would involve a call-out after intelligence indicated fascist activity – eg a BNP election leafleting would be taking place (mobilisations weren't just about marches). AFA would meet, send out scouts, and act according to intelligence gathered on the day. Sometimes AFA leafleting of estates was not just to counter fascist propaganda, but also to provide a legal excuse for being there. As time went on, in the Northern Network (London AFA operated very differently), each local group elected a delegate during mobilisations. Delegates from each group got together on the day and coordinated events. Usually, but not always, the unofficial 'chief steward' was the one in whose backyard the nazi mobilisation had occurred. Near Manchester this was likely to be someone from Manchester AFA/Red Action, but even close to Manchester this wasn't always the case – for instance, an anarchist from nowhere near Manchester was the chief steward at a mobilisation at Colne, Lancs^[9]. Coordination, anyway, was more based on informal working relationships and trust rather than any official positions, and once the fascists were located, what happened next had more to do with personal initiative and 'bottle' than a 'commander'.

The main national public AFA events over these years are reasonably well known (or used to be), but are worth outlining:

In London, Blood and Honour – the nazi music front – was beaten off the streets in 1989 when they tried to organise publicly. In 1991 an AFA Unity Carnival in London – attended by 10,000 in September – was followed on Remembrance Sunday by a 4,000 strong confrontational 'National Demonstration Against Racist Attacks' through the East End. From reacting to the fascists, AFA was seizing the initiative. This was the biggest anti-fascist demo in years – AFA seemed on the verge of some kind of breakthrough.

Instead, seeing the way the wind was blowing, within months the SWP had re-launched the Anti-Nazi League (a very different animal to the original ANL of the 1970's^[10]), Militant launched Youth Against Racism in Europe, and Black Nationalists in the Labour Party launched the Anti-Racist Alliance^[11]. The end result of this was that, while these new organisations brought in new faces, anti-fascist unity had suddenly become a competitive market place, with organisations which were better funded, and better-connected in terms of media publicity than AFA. AFA did continue to help organise and provide stewards for specific broader anti-racist marches – such as the 1992 'National Demonstration Against Racist Murders'^[12] – but there were no more AFA marches. By 1993, in big national anti-fascist marches, like the marches to the BNP headquarters in Welling, organised by all the 'big names' – the biggest of 40,000 in September 1993 – AFA activists either organised separately to track down any BNP groups (eg London) or joined the

*Recruitment leaflet for
The 1992 'Battle of
Waterloo'*

UNSCREW SKREWDRIVER!



Assemble:
Saturday 12th September 1992 at 4.30pm
Waterloo BR
(Bring a Travelcard)

Anti-Fascist Action
BM Box 1734
London WC1N 3XX

march (eg Liverpool). AFA carnivals did still continue. A rained-on Unity Carnival in London in September 1992 provided a useful recruiting ground for the 'Battle of Waterloo' a week later – when Blood and Honour were smashed off the streets again, by over 1,000 anti-fascists organised around AFA. The last big AFA carnival was in Newcastle in June 1993, with 10,000 taking part. In London, in January 1994, an AFA national mobilisation humiliated another attempt by neo-nazis to go public – this time by Combat 18^[13].

Other areas AFA was involved in included Cable Street Beat – inspired by the Rock Against Racism of the original (1970's) ANL, to promote anti-fascism through music. Freedom of Movement was set up later – based in Manchester – to further this idea in the clubbing scene. Other AFA campaigns were launched to promote anti-fascism at football grounds – starting with Leeds, and later Newcastle, Manchester, Glasgow, etc. A national AFA magazine – *Fighting Talk* – was produced, and the AFA profile was also raised by a BBC 'Open Space' programme fronted by Mensi from the Angelic Upstarts band.



Break down of the United Front

The 'united front' – where activists worked together and no-one took the piss – started to break down as the 1990's progressed.

The relationship with *Searchlight* started to turn sour. Anarchists had never trusted *Searchlight* since at least the early 1980's – when articles in anarchist papers examined *Searchlight*'s then editor Gerry Gable's links with Special Branch (alleging a 'something for something' relationship – ie *Searchlight* would give details to the State, and not just about fascists...) ^[14]. In 1993 *Searchlight* ran a smear campaign against anarchists – in particular

against specific DAM and Class War members – alleging they were really fascists. This probably wasn't a coincidence now there were alternatives to AFA to back... From the mid-1990's Red Action – who had previously had a very close relationship with *Searchlight* – began more and more to take the line that association with *Searchlight* was becoming a liability – with *Searchlight* increasingly providing mis-information and trying to manipulate AFA for it's own agenda ^[15].

Relationships between Red Action and anarchists also began to break down. In London, State interest in Red Action at this time seemed more than just paranoia, and anarchists were obviously being kept out of the loop. Workers Power left for the ANL, many independents left, and, increasingly, London AFA was moving from an alliance run mainly by Red Action, to one consisting more or less exclusively of Red Action.

In Glasgow – around late 1992 – relationships between anarchists and Glasgow Red Action deteriorated to the extent that anarchists felt compelled to organise a separate meeting. At least two anarchists leaving the meeting were physically attacked by Red Action members. One of the organisers of the meeting – a committed anti-fascist of long standing – was later falsely smeared as a police grass in Red Action's paper *Red Action* ^[16].

The main contribution to the united front breaking down, however, became the pushing of a new Red Action strategy – the Independent Working Class Association – around 1995. The IWCA didn't come from nowhere. A turning point, as far as London Red Action goes, was the election of a BNP councillor – Derek Beacon – in the Isle of Dogs, London, in 1993. As was said at the time, London AFA felt they had nothing to offer people apart from 'don't vote BNP', which in the circumstances, Red Action felt, could only have meant vote Labour or Liberal Democrat – the very people who'd helped create the housing problems in the Isle of Dogs in the first place. Red Action had always been a strong supporter of the Irish Republican movement – and the move of Republicans from the armed struggle towards community organising, and the electoral success of Sinn Fein, may well have also played a role in the re-thinking of Red Action's strategy.

When Red Action started pushing forward the idea of the IWCA, articles were written, circulars sent out, and a meeting held in the North in late 1995 where London Red Action put forward their case. The argument was basically 'if not us, who?' was to fill the political vacuum created on the left by Labour abandoning the working class on the one hand, and AFA's success in beating the fascists on the right. The BNP were moving from the 'battle of the streets' (which they'd lost) to a EuroNationalist/community activist ^[17] strategy. AFA,

it was stated, would have to adapt. This wasn't billed as a decision-making meeting. No vote was taken, but from then on Red Action argued that there was a 'mandate' – that there was a 'consensus' in AFA to officially back the IWCA – despite the Northern Network voting against official backing (a warning to anarchists who worship 100% consensus and never voting...) [18]. This position was backed by London's control of *Fighting Talk* [19].

As was said at the time, many AFA activists already had wider political commitments – and Red Action's analysis wasn't unique on the need to 'fill the vacuum'. In Liverpool, Labour Party purges against Militant led to the Broad Left (of which Militant was a part) standing candidates as 'Real Labour' from 1991, and, again in Liverpool, the Independent Labour Party (this time without Militant) was launched in 1992 [20]. Scottish Militant Labour was launched in 1991, with Militant Labour following in 1993, standing candidates against Labour, and leading to the launch of the Scottish Socialist Party, and the Socialist Party in England in 1998. As Red Action pushed the IWCA in 1996, Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party was launched [21]. As was stated then, why should a united front organisation like AFA prioritise any particular working class party in an election? After all, AFA was open for SLP and other party supporters to join – and many AFA activists were against electoralism as a strategy anyway. The IWCA down-playing of the workplace as an area of struggle also came at the time when 500 Liverpool Dockers had been locked out and solidarity actions were occurring all over the world (most notably among USA Longshoremen and in Australia) during a struggle lasting over 2 years (Sept 1995-Jan 1998). Possibly a major difference with the Red Action push to form the IWCA was that it initially aimed, not just at various left groupings (prominent at the original IWCA founding meeting in 1995 [22]) but mainly at those in AFA – often those sick of the left, party politics in general, and often anarchists. AFA was being pushed as the launch-pad for, and backbone of, the IWCA.

AFA had worked because it was a 'real' organisation involved in 'real' actions that made a difference. Increasingly, AFA activists I knew were hostile to Red Action's attempts to 're-align' AFA. One ex-Marxist in Liverpool AFA, for instance, felt it was the same old party-political bullshit they'd left behind. There was, eventually, a compromise of sorts – but the whole process left a bad taste [23]. The IWCA was being pushed as a way to stop AFA stagnating as the BNP abandoned the battle for the streets. In reality, the struggle for the party political line alienated much of the AFA core and periphery – in undermining the united front it became a factor in the decline it was stated to prevent [24].

Looking back

I stopped being active in AFA around the end of 1996. I don't believe in sniping from the sidelines at events I wasn't involved in, but here's an honest opinion on the last years [25]. First, some anti-fascist mobilisations did still occur – eg against the NF in Dover in 1997 and 1998. Internally, a new (or what Red Action called a 'newly inaugurated') AFA National Coordinating Committee was set up in 1997. From the way this was used it is clear that this Committee actually had powers – a far cry from the old national committee. In itself, I think, this is an indication of how few anarchists were still involved organisationally by now, and how far the Northern Network had declined. In 1997 an AFA statement officially banned members from associating with *Searchlight* – and, in 1998, Leeds and Huddersfield AFA were expelled by the new Committee, officially for ignoring this policy [26] [27]. Expulsions didn't stop the decline. There were some local re-launches – eg Liverpool in 2000. But by 2001 – though probably a long time before – AFA as a national organisation hardly existed.

Red Action's analysis, back in 1995, was that, unless AFA adapted to the new BNP strategy, AFA would 'atrophy' and wither. AFA was geared for confrontation. Without confrontation AFA – as it then was – would have no reason to exist. It is true that organisations created for a single purpose – anti-poll tax unions, strike support groups etc – do usually cease to exist once the struggle is gone, despite efforts by some activists to keep things going and to generalise the struggles (these efforts did happen in the 1980's and 1990's, and they did usually fail). So, maybe this Red Action analysis was far-sighted and has been proved right by events. Or, maybe, this was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I think some of the decline in AFA nationally has to be down to the IWCA. Apart from the refusal of many AFA activists to be bounced into a strategy they disagreed with, the redirection of energy of an important section of AFA into a new organisation, would, of itself, have meant less time for keeping AFA going. But there were definitely other factors. If a tactic is repeated too often, the police eventually cotton on. This happened with the 'Stop the City' demos in the early 1980's and the 'J18'-style demos in the late 1990's/ early 2000's [28]. There's a case to be made that AFA's means of operation – in some parts of the country at least – became too predictable, and so ineffective (as was recorded in *Red Action* and *Fighting Talk* at the time). The broader community and trade union side of AFA also tended to die away as the anti-fascist market place emerged (ANL, YRE, ARA etc) – and a semi-clandestine

strategy alone has to be constantly innovative or eventually fail. The break with *Searchlight*, I think, also played a role. Without good intelligence militant anti-fascism is blind. A lot of intelligence gathering is just hard boring work, and can be done by any local activists with the will. Only *Searchlight* though has used infiltration of fascist groups to any great extent – and this was more than useful in the North at least.

Finally, there's the issue of the AFA periphery. The IWCA aside, the far fewer regional and national mobilisations in the late 1990's, and the much lower AFA national public profile, in themselves, would have led to the shrinkage of the pool from which new AFA activists could emerge – especially in an organising role. At some point this had to have an effect. Street fighting has a shelf life due to age. Arrests, injuries, and increasing family commitments mean that without constant new blood any militant organisation will enter decline, if only from attrition. This situation wasn't just true of AFA, but was a general trend within the anarchist movement that had grown up since the early 1980's. A smaller pool, with fewer mobilisations, and important sections of AFA now prioritising the IWCA, meant that AFA decline was gradual rather than sudden.

IWCA

So what about the IWCA today? Times have moved on. There are two types of questions that spring to mind:

1. Is the IWCA an effective strategy for building a working class movement?
2. Did the IWCA effectively replace AFA, and how is the IWCA as an anti-fascist strategy?

The first question is really beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, however, the IWCA has shown that, in some areas at least, small groups of activists can gain a base, from more or less nothing, that can be turned into sizeable votes at election time. The concentration on immediate working class issues is also something that any community activist could learn from. The web site has some good ideas^{[29][30]}.

What about the second issue?

Is the IWCA a natural progression from AFA? The AFA public contact list had over 30 groups spread across Britain in 1996. The strongest Red Action groups used to be London, Manchester, and Glasgow. The IWCA made a strong showing in North London (Islington) and Glasgow (Strathbungo) council by-elections in 2003. However, it's Oxford where the IWCA has had most success so far – with 3 councillors. The IWCA web

sites, in late 2004, showed groups based almost entirely in the South – which does raise the question: what happened to the original IWCA opening campaigns in Manchester and Birmingham back in the mid-1990's? Why doesn't the IWCA have a presence in Manchester (or at least one that is noticeable)? As far as I can tell, the IWCA has some overlap with ex-AFA (mostly Red Action, but also some anarchists or ex-anarchists), but to say the IWCA is a natural progression of AFA as a whole isn't true. Some AFA groups and individuals moved towards IWCA activism, many didn't^[31].

Is the IWCA an effective anti-fascist strategy? As stated, in some areas the IWCA has gained a foothold. None of these, however, are areas where the BNP is a direct contender – eg Burnley or Goresbrook (London) – so council elections where the IWCA and the BNP go head-to-head are presumably in the future. The issue of why militant anti-fascists should prioritise one working class political party (or strategy) over another, however, hasn't gone away. In Coventry, for instance, the Socialist Party has 2 councillors (down from 3). In Scotland the Scottish Socialist Party is a contender – like them or loath them – and in Strathbungo the IWCA and SSP both stood candidates. Even now, if anti-fascists want to support a working class anti-fascist election candidate, the IWCA isn't necessarily the only choice.

Physical Force?

The IWCA may be many things, but it's not a physical force militant anti-fascist organisation. Is there a need for militant physical force anti-fascism still? More importantly, can this strategy work now? Things are very different now – when AFA started out, CCTV centralised street networks didn't exist and mobile phones were like walkie-talkies. What used to lead to charges of 'breach of the peace' is now more likely to be 'violent disorder' or worse (if the Terrorism Act 2000 etc is anything to go by). Where does this leave anti-fascists who want to make a difference, now? As a 2004 TV expose showed^[32], the BNP hard-core is still nazi – though well-hidden behind suits and smiles at present, and growing with the constant media barrage – and manna from heaven for the BNP – against asylum seekers and muslims. The enforcing of 'No Platform for Fascists' seems to have gone by the board with almost regular BNP interviews in the national media.

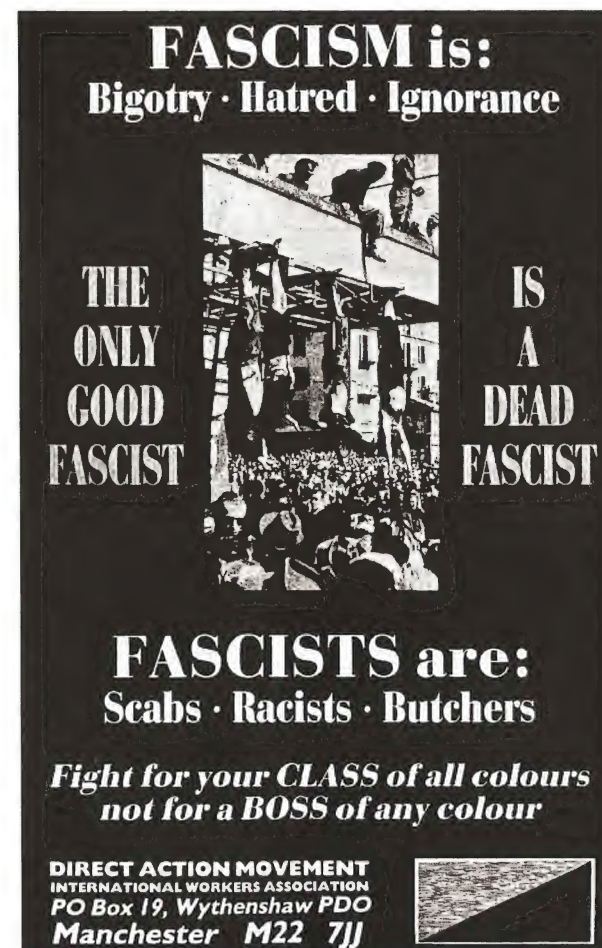
A fairly recent (October 2003) pamphlet by an ex-London AFA member – now in Sunderland – has this to say:

"I also believe that the demise and then the winding up of Anti-Fascist Action, and the inability so far of militants to develop a similar organisation has been a big boost in the growth in the BNP. AFA was able to physically

defeat the BNP in the 1990's... but when the BNP turned away from street confrontations towards electoral politics AFA largely wound down its activities. Instead of harassing the BNP on the doorsteps, and on the streets as they canvassed AFA allowed the BNP to operate freely and the BNP have used the freedom to develop a highly professional electoral strategy^[33].

AFA used to say – “fascism didn't begin with the concentration camps – that's where it ended”. We know where fascism leads, so that leaves no room for complacency. AFA's active policy used to be for “physical and ideological opposition” to fascism. Things are very different today, but either the BNP are fascists or they're not. The need to provide a working class alternative to labour and fascism should be the priority. But if the BNP are fascists – and they are – the case for militant confrontation certainly hasn't gone away.

An ex-Liverpool AFA member.
February 2005



A DAM poster of the early 1990's. Central picture: Mussolini swings from piano wire – Milan, 1945

NOTES

1. *No Retreat: The secret war between Britain's Anti-Fascists and the Far Right*. Dave Hann and Steve Tilzey. Milo Books.
2. www.antifa.org.uk.

3. This article has been run past other ex-AFA members – from Liverpool and elsewhere – to cross-check the facts and provide feedback.

4. Eg attempted fascist meetings in the Adelphi Hotel and St. George's Hotel.

5. Information taken from the Liverpool AFA minutes of the national meeting – these were a lot more detailed than the official minutes.

6. DAM abolished itself and launched the Solidarity Federation in 1994 – the aim being to build a class organisation based on anarcho-syndicalist principles – based on industrial and community networks – rather than being just a political grouping of anarcho-syndicalists (see <http://www.direct-action.org.uk/>). Not all DAM members – including some of the most active anti-fascists – joined the new organisation.

7. For a brief overview of some of the events in London AFA during these years, from a DAM member's perspective, see the pamphlet *Bash the Fash – Anti-Fascist Recollections 1984-93*, K.Bullstreet. Published by Kate Sharpley Library, BM Hurricane London, WC1N 3XX.

NOTE: Every would-be militant would do well to read the section 'Appendix 4: Survival Rules'.

8. Scotland existed as a Region probably since 1993. In 1994 the Midlands Region was launched and moves were begun to launch a Southern Region. The AFA public contact list in 1996 (as shown in *Fighting Talk*) had 12 groups listed in the North, 12 in the South (including London), 4 in the Midlands, 3 in Scotland, and 1 in Wales. There were quite a number of groups not in the list – eg Doncaster, Chesterfield, and Mansfield. Groups also varied in terms of numbers and resources, and were often contacts for a much wider area (ie you really need to know the background) but this still gives a rough idea about where AFA's strength lay at this time.

9. This isn't a review of *No Retreat*. However, some points are in order. The book covers some of the mobilisations that happened in the North West – but several mobilisations where Dave Hann wasn't present are missed out (York 1988, Rochdale and Dewsbury 1989, and Wigan 1990 for instance). This is an autobiographical account, so this would probably be expected. There are also factual inaccuracies as who did what – the issue of who was the 'chief steward' being one of them. This isn't necessarily bad memory or worse

(though it could be – the need for a 'good story' etc). Adrenaline leads to tunnel vision, were you think you're at the front of the queue, or leading people from the front, but it ain't necessarily so... I could make more serious criticisms of the book, but I'll stop here.

10. For a comparison of the old and new ANL, see *The Anti-Nazi League, A Critical Examination 1977-81/2 and 1992-95*. Originally published by the Colin Roach Centre in 1996, it can be read at <http://www.red-star-research.org.uk/rpm/anl.html> .

11. 'Black Nationalist' meaning that, according to ARA, racism could only be fought under Black leadership. Where this left Asian, Chinese, and Irish members wasn't mentioned...

12. November 1992, Eltham, London. The march was held under the banner of the 'Rohit Duggal Family Campaign'. 16 year old Rohit Duggal was murdered in July 1992 in a racist attack.

13. Some people called this 'Waterloo 2' – though it wasn't anywhere near as public. Combat 18 (18 standing for AH – ie Adolf Hitler) was the short-lived organisation of nazi 'hard men' and would-be terrorists designed to take on AFA and others. C18 eventually disintegrated. The history of C18 is quite convoluted and bizarre, so I won't go into it here.

14. Various articles in anarchist papers and magazines [eg *Anarchy* magazine number 36, 1983 <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/bulletin/issues/kslb28.htm#searchlight>]. Also *New Statesman*, 15.02.1980.

15. See various articles on the Red Action web site www.redaction.org. Also various *Fighting Talks*. Whatever the reasons, it's clear there was a breakdown in the *Searchlight*-Red Action relationship.

16. Information re-confirmed recently [2004] by a then member of Glasgow DAM, and by a contact in Liverpool. Looking back, the Glasgow Red Action attack on anarchists wasn't really dealt with properly – either within AFA or the wider anarchist movement. As it was, the incident caused a lot of bad blood nationally, but AFA held together.

17. "EuroNationalist" meaning a strategy similar to Le Pen's National Front

in France – rather than a ‘march and grow’ storm trooper traditional nazi approach. ‘March and grow’ in Britain had by now become a lot closer to ‘march and die’.

18. Liverpool AFA sent out a statement nationally – soon after London Red Action’s meeting, arguing against AFA becoming the physical wing or part of any political party or organisation. This statement was provisionally adopted at the next Northern Network meeting, pending further debate.

19. *Fighting Talk* (Nov 1995) stated that the Northern Network supported the IWCA, and printed an IWCA recruitment article. This was never updated. AFA groups were sent IWCA leaflets with ‘AFA’ on as sponsors. To keep things brief – the way things happened could, perhaps, have been due to a genuine misunderstanding of how the Northern Network operated. It came across as railroading – to put it mildly. It could certainly have been handled better.

20 There’s some background information on this in “The Labour Party, Marxism And Liverpool”: <http://proms.snu.ac.kr/~skkim/data/article/files/liverpool.html>

21. The various parties’ own reasons for setting up can be found on their web sites.

22. The IWCA was originally promoted as a kind of ‘united front’ of different political groups – where people could join “without demanding that they abandon their distinctive positions” (IWCA leaflet attacking the SLP, 1996). Not having to abandon your politics wasn’t strictly true, as – leaving aside Red Action’s dismissal of syndicalism – the IWCA was always up front about standing in elections. This was always going to be a problem for many anarchists in AFA.

23. Months later (in what may or may not have been a concession) London Red Action stated that IWCA material would no longer have initial sponsors’ names on – ie they wouldn’t have ‘AFA’ on. Later *Fighting Talks* were also less blatant about the IWCA. At a Northern Network meeting (I haven’t been able to confirm the date – possibly mid-1996) a London Red Action member argued that London should be given a chance to put their strategy into action. While it’s clear there wasn’t a split as such, it’s also very clear that the

Northern Network didn’t vote to support the IWCA. Major issues still remained.

24. This is bound to be a point of contention. I believe it’s accurate – certainly within the Northern Network, the largest and most established AFA Region outside of London at the time. Not a lot of information came directly from AFA groups in other Regions in this period, so I can’t speak for areas I don’t know.

25. See various articles on the Web – A-Infos, Anti-Fa Infos, Red Action web sites. Also personal contacts used. So I believe it’s accurate. I’ve left out the forming of international links – including the international anti-fascist conference in London in 1997 – as I don’t think this had much effect on AFA’s development in Britain.

26. The official public statement on the expulsions was in *Fighting Talk* No 19 April 1998 (also at <http://www.ainfos.ca/98/may/ainfos00300.html>). Red Action’s official explanations are at their web site – www.redaction.org – see various articles in the ‘anti-fascism’ section. Red Action has a lot of good points, but also a lot of inaccuracies. For instance, it’s not true that only AFA groups with links to *Searchlight* were opposed to AFA officially backing the IWCA back in 1995/6 – the opposition was a lot wider. No-one had a problem with Red Action being involved with the IWCA – many people had a problem with an official AFA-IWCA link.

27. An anarchist ex-Leeds AFA member recently [2004] gave me a very different version of events to the official one as to why the expulsions occurred. However, I don’t have enough information to give a proper written opinion about this – so, rather than speculate, I won’t.

28. “Stop the City” were attempts by the, then massive, anti-militarist movement to occupy and close down the City of London. “J18” (June 18th) etc were similar-style demonstrations by the emerging anti-capitalist movement.

29. IWCA web site is at <http://www.iwca.info/>

30. This isn’t an article about whether Anarchists should support the IWCA either. However, some points: are worth making. First, voting in local elections (and concentrating on the community rather than industry) has been

advocated by some people from an anarchist tradition for some time. In particular, Murray Bookchin, in the US, has been promoting Libertarian Municipalism as a way forward since the 1980's. Second, Liverpool Council under Militant in the early 1980's – the fight against Tory rate-capping, the surcharge and expulsion of 47 councillors etc – showed some of the potential and the limits of what radical councillors can do. Third, current enthusiasm for the IWCA in some quarters is very similar to the enthusiasm shown by some Scottish anarchists in the early 1990's – when Scottish Militant Labour arose from the anti-poll tax successes of Militant in Pollokshields and elsewhere.^[30.5] This isn't totally new territory.

30.5 Quite an interesting article, from *Scottish Anarchist* no 2 [1994?] which covers the emergence of Militant Labour in Scotland is at <http://www.spunk.org/texts/pubs/sa/2/sp001218.txt>

31. If the Northern Network (or its majority) had 'really' agreed to back the IWCA in 1995 – as has been argued – I think there would be more proof on the ground by now. This isn't to say that the IWCA won't get a base up North – just that this will have to happen under it's own steam, rather than as part of an AFA legacy. At the time of writing the one published IWCA contact up North – though set up only in late 2004 – is the Vauxhall IWCA in Liverpool.

32. 'Secret Agent', BBC1, July 2004 – an undercover investigation into Bradford BNP.

33. *The Rise of the BNP and how to Counter it* Revolutions Per Minute number 11. Written by Mark Metcalf. Available at Freedom books, or www.red-star-research.org.uk, or read it at <http://www.red-star-research.org.uk/rpm/AF/AF.html>. This is a very short pamphlet with a lot of common sense.

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